DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 412 556 CS 216 039

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TITLE A Content Analysis of the Family Structure in Children's Literature for the Periods between 1955-1970 and 1980-1995.
PUB DATE 1997-07-00
NOTE 31p.; M.L.S. Research Paper, Kent State University.
PUB TYPE Dissertations/Theses (040)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Childrens Literature; Content Analysis; Divorce; Family Size; *Family Structure; *Fiction; Intermediate Grades; Junior High Schools; Middle Schools; North American Culture; One Parent Family; Parent Child Relationship; *Popular Culture; *Sociocultural Patterns; Twentieth Century Literature; United States Literature
IDENTIFIERS *Trade Books

ABSTRACT

A study examined how the family structure has changed over time in contemporary realistic children's literature for middle readers. There is an ongoing debate in this country about what defines a family and whether it is in transformation or becoming extinct. Since 1960 there is evidence that the family structure has changed. The books selected in the study were limited to 35 books published in the United States from 1955 to 1970 and 35 books published in the United States from 1980 to 1995. Results of the analyses of the stories indicated that there was a decrease in the depiction of the traditional two-parent family and an increase in the single parent family. The majority of the stories still represent parents with biological children. The number of children represented has decreased, and parents had fewer children in the later time period. The cause of a non-two-parent family in the earlier time period was because the parents had died and in the later time period it was because parents had divorced. In all cases, the father worked outside the home; however, the cases where the mother worked outside the home increased. Regarding family structure problems, the majority of child protagonists did not have conflicts. There was an increase in problems concerning family structure, but the percentage of problem resolution also increased. (Contains 6 tables of data and 25 references; a coding sheet is appended.) (Author/CR)

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A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE FAMILY STRUCTURE IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE FOR THE PERIODS BETWEEN 1955-1970 AND 1980-1995

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A Master's Research Paper submitted to the
Kent State University School of Library Science
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree Master of Library Science

by

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July, 1997

CS216039

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Abstract

There is an ongoing debate in this country about what defines a family and whether it is in transformation or becoming extinct. Since 1960, there is evidence that the family structure has changed. The purpose of this study was to see how the family structure has changed over time in contemporary realistic children's literature for middle readers. The books selected in the study were limited to 35 books published in the United States from 1955 to 1970 and 35 books published in the United States from 1980 to 1995.

The result of the analyses of the stories shows that there was a decrease in the depiction of the traditional two-parent family and an increase in the single parent family. The majority of the stories still represent parents with biological children. The data showed that the number of children represented has decreased and that parents had fewer children in the later time period. Another main point is that the cause of a non two-parent family in the earlier time period was because the parents had died and in the later time period it was because the parents had divorced. In all cases the father worked outside the home; however, the mother working outside the home had increased. As far as family structure problems, the majority of child protagonists did not have conflicts. There was an increase in problems concerning family structure, but the percentage of problem resolution also increased.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. L. Butler for all her help and instruction on this paper. I would also like to recognize Patricia Righetti and her family for all the much appreciated help and support they have given me. Most importantly, special thanks go to my parents, Eligio and Fiorina Gallo, for their financial support and to the rest of my family, Carolina, Jesse, Matt, and Gisella, for their emotional support.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Since 1992, when Vice President Dan Quayle blamed the Los Angeles riots on the "breakdown of the nuclear family," there has been an ongoing debate in this country on the family structure and its effects on society (Swisher 1997, 7). Vice President Quayle referred to Murphy Brown, a single mother on television, and her decision to have a child without a father as representation of a society that will easily condone the breakdown of the traditional family. The actress that played the character of Murphy Brown, Candice Bergen, in response to his statement concluded that today the meaning of the family has changed and families come in many "shapes and sizes" (Swisher 1997, 7). According to Candice Bergen the true meaning of family is "commitment, caring and love" (Swisher 1997, 7).

What exactly is a family? In 1992 the U.S. Bureau of Census defined family as "a group of two or more persons related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together in a household" (Gelles 1995, 10). A more inclusive definition of the family is that "the family is a social group and social institution that possesses an identifiable structure made up of positions and interactions among those who occupy the position" (Gelles 1995, 10).

The debate about what defines a family and whether it is in "trouble" is ongoing (Gelles 1995, 27). When debates occur, idealized versions of what families should be and what they were like in the past are talked about (Gelles 1995, 29). The ideal family is the father who works and supports the family while the mother works in the home taking care of the children. People always refer to the television shows set in the 1950s

and 1960s. Families in "Leave It To Beaver" and "Ozzie and Harriet" were romanticized and in actuality "never really existed" (Wagner and Swisher 1992, 13). Even though there was a large number of nuclear families during that time, women working outside the home and divorced parents did exist.

In 1992, "70 percent of America's families are nontraditional" (Wagner and Swisher 1992, 13). A large percentage of families consist of both parents who work or who are a single parent family. Today, the meaning of family has expanded to include "homosexual couples with children," "grandparents raising grandchildren," and "communal families" (Wagner and Swisher 1992, 14).

David Popen recognizes that the social forces of the 1960s have led to the breakdown of the nuclear family. These social forces of the 1960s include the "rapid fertility" rate, the "sexual revolution," the "movement of mothers in the labor force," and the "divorce revolution" (Wagner and Swisher 1992, 18).

Dennis K. Orthner believes that the family is in "transition" (Wagner and Swisher 1992, 25). He believes that "values, such as caring for children and the importance of kinship" are still there and need to be "strengthened" by "government, corporate, and community support networks" (Wagner and Swisher 1992, 25). Shere Hute also supports that the family and its transformation is not a "sign of the breakdown of the society" but "is a sign of a new, more open and tolerant society" (Hute 1994, 2).

Whatever the view is on the family structure, statistics show that it has changed since 1960. Between 1960 and 1996, the number of American children living in single-parent homes increased from 5.8 million to 18 million (Swisher 1997,7). Children born to unmarried mothers was 5.3 percent in 1960 and as of 1996 it has increased to 30

percent (Swisher 1997, 7). Between 1960 and 1980 the divorce rate in the United States increased 250 percent (Swisher 1997, 8).

How has the family structure been represented in children's literature? Lystad describes a study that covers 200 years of children's literature. In the eighteenth century books that depicted two-parent families with a large number of children were most common. Both parents were shown taking care of the children and giving them instructions (Lystad 1979, 2). The cause of most of the family problems depicted was adultery and death. There were no major changes in the nineteenth century literature, however, towards the Victorian Age mothers who were depicted were shown as the primary care givers (Lystad 1979, 3). The main cause of family disruptions was alcohol abuse. For the first half of the twentieth century, the families were depicted as having good and happy relationships (Lystad 1979, 4). Horner states that the "single-parent family has always been represented in children's literature" (Horner 1988, v). In the later part of the 1980s, divorce is the major cause of single parent families in children's literature (Horner 1988, vi). Toward the end of the century, single-parent families where divorce was accepted appeared and now the causes of family dysfunction are varied (Lystad 1979, 5). These are some aspects of the family structure in literature that were studied. There are many other characteristics in families and family structure that need to be examined in children's literature.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to see how the family structure has changed over time in contemporary realistic children's literature for middle readers. The study shows increases or decreases in certain types of family structures. The study shows how occupational roles for a male parent and female parent have changed. The study also shows whether family structure affects the problems the child protagonist has in the literature and whether there is a resolution at the end of the story.

Definitions of Terms

1. Communal family- More than one family living in the same household.
2. Contemporary realistic fiction- Plot, characters, and settings in the mid-twentieth century of later that are made up of stories that could have happened.
3. Extended family- Three or more generations related by blood or marriage living together in the same household.
4. Middle readers- Middle readers are children in grades three through sixth grades or ages eight through eleven.

Limitations of the Study

Books selected in the study were limited to 35 books published in the United States from 1955 to 1970 and 35 books published in the United States from 1980 to 1995. The books selected were taken from particular lists and do not represent all of the books from that particular time period. The study is limited to books for middle readers.

There is a wide variation in age and grade levels for children's books. The age and grade levels were taken from the sources used even though other sources may suggest other age or grade levels. The age and grade levels may also overlap to younger audiences or older audiences. If there is more than one family in the story, only the protagonist's family was examined. The study was limited to books in contemporary settings set in the United States. The study was also limited to books with realistic plots.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since family is an integral part of society, the theme of family shows up in much of the children's literature. There have been some studies done of different aspects of the family theme in children's literature. Studies related to family structure were reviewed in topics relating to the male and female role, the single parent family, the family structure as it represents society, the comparison of the changing family structure, and the relationships of the family unit.

The male and female roles have been analyzed in family related children's books in two studies. In 1959 Ruth Green analyzed American families in children's literature. As a result of looking at families in 27 books, it was determined that the "immediate family unit" was described most often (Bekkedal 1973, 111). Most often the family consisted of parents and their children with the mother as the full-time caretaker (Bekkedal 1973, 111). One study compared male and female roles in picture books from two different time periods. A random sample of ten books was taken from 1955-1960 and 1980-1985. The earlier generation showed traditional roles. Even though women were not shown in high status or high paying jobs, the men were shown in the home environment taking care of the children (McRowe 1989, 37-38).

The single-parent family has been another focus of study. A content analysis of 25 kindergarten through sixth grade children's books, from 1970s to the 1980s, examined the portrayal of children in families of divorce, single-parent families, and stepfamilies. The conclusions showed that "72% of the mother's had custody," "12% had joint custody," 60% of the protagonists had mothers that worked outside the home, 16% had

stepparents and 8% had stepbrothers or sisters (Teeter 1991, 18). In 1970 there was a study done on the single-parent family in contemporary realistic fiction for grades 7 through 12. A content analysis was done on the "home, familial emotions, non-familial relationships, and stereotypes . . ." (Chaudoir 1979, 125). Sixty-two books that were published from 1964 through 1970 were selected. The conclusions revealed that in forty-one of the books, the mother was the main parental figure in the home. Death was the major cause of a single-parent household followed by divorce (Chaudoir 1979, 127). Occupations of the parents varied in traditional and non-traditional occupations. It was found that the single parents in these books provided "acceptable homes" for their children (Chaudoir 1979, 133). However, conflicts such as adjusting to the loss of a parent or parents dating again were apparent in the literature. Conflicts between child and parent were found to be resolved by the end of the story (Chaudoir 1979, 133).

Family structure and how it accurately represented society was the subject of two studies. A study was done in 1987 to determine the quality of family life in pre-teen books from 1969 to 1983 (McIntosh 1987). An objective of the study was to determine whether the representation of traditional and non-traditional families reflected the trends in society (McIntosh 1987). A psychological test was also used to see whether non-traditional families were less favorable than traditional families (McIntosh 1987). The results showed that traditional families were "over represented" compared with society (McIntosh 1987). It was also found that the two types of families were neither more troubled nor less effective (McIntosh 1987). A study was done to see if the traditional family accurately reflected census statistics in young adult literature between 1970 and 1990. The results showed that the percentage of books with traditional families is less

than the percentage of actual traditional families in the United States. This shows, as a result, that there are more non-traditional family settings in young adult literature, which is not consistent with actual life (Collins 1991).

A recent study was done that compared the family structure between two time periods. In 1996 there was a content analysis done of children and young adult books from 1950-1960 and 1985-1995 that looked at society and changes in family structure. The conclusions from the study showed that 47% of the books before 1960 showed favorable family relations and 57% of the books after 1985 showed unfavorable family relations. Thirty percent of the books before 1960 showed unsatisfactpry family relations and 60% of the books after 1985 showed unsatisfactory family relations (Seelye 1996, 19). "Intact traditional families" increased from 20% to 50%. "Single non-traditional families" increased from 27% to 33% (Seelye 1996, 20). The non-traditional family before 1960 was the result of a parent dying. After 1960, the non-traditional family was the result of the breakup of marital relationships (Seelye 1996, 20).

The family and the relationships between the child and parent has been researched in four studies. A 1973 study analyzed fourteen recommended children's books published from 1960 to 1970. One of the aspects of the study focused on twenty heroines and their family and home life. The study revealed whether the girls were living with one or two parents, that there was a majority of parents that were depicted as being non-supportive and having dysfunctional tendencies (Siege 1973, 1039-41). In 1975 a study was done on the parental role and the family structure. Twenty-six children's books from 1950-1960 and 1964-1974 were compared. It was concluded

that in the later period the parent was represented as being less emotionally supportive and accepting of the child, but at the same time the parent was more concerned about how the child developed intellectually, socially, and emotionally (Boothby 1975). A content analysis was done on the social interactions of 34 families in teenage level contemporary fiction. Family structure and behaviors were studied based on the J. Lewis study done on non-fictional families. The conclusion of this study found that a majority of the authors portrayed non-effective parental figures (Lukenbill 1981, 225). A more recent content analysis was done on twenty young adult books concerning the relationships of parents and family life. The results showed that the majority of parents were supportive and that there were more two-parent families represented. Problems occurred mainly from family embarrassment situations, divorce, and death. Finally, the majority of relationships portrayed grew positively throughout the book (Sampson 1991).

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used to conduct this research was a content analysis of 35 books from 1955-1960 and 35 books from 1980-1995. Books were selected from recommended lists in The Best in Children's Books (Sutherland 1973). Best Books For Children: Preschool Through the Middle Grades (Gillespie and Gilbert 1978), Best Books For Children: Preschool Through the Middle Grades (Gillespie and Gilbert 1981), Best Books For Children: Preschool Through the Middle Grades (Gillespie and Gilbert 1985), Best Books For Children: Preschool Through Grade 6 (Gillespie and Naden 1994), Through the Eyes of a Child: An Introduction to Children's Literature (Nortorn 1991), Good Books For Children (Eakin 1966), and Subject Guide to Children's Books in Print 1997. Family, family related, and realistic subject headings were used in determining selection. The books selected focused on the middle reading age group and on chapter books. After the information was coded, the data was distributed in tables showing frequencies and percentages of different types of family structure in both time periods (see coding sheet in Appendix A).

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS OF THE DATA

A total of 70 books was analyzed for the period of 1955-1970 and 1980-1995. The majority of books analyzed depicted the two-parent family for the earlier time period and the single-parent family for the later time period. The data shows a significant decrease in the depiction of the traditional two-parent family and a significant increase in the single-family family. In the earlier time period there were 77.14% two-parent families depicted and 11.43% single-parent families depicted. In the later time period, there were 34.29% two-parent families depicted and 42.86% single parent families depicted. In both cases there were no same sex parents or communal families represented (see Table 1).

The majority of children depicted in the families were the result of a biological relationship for both time periods. In the earlier time period there were 94.60% biological children and in the later time period there were 89.47% biological children represented. The earlier time period depicted 2.70 percent step-sibling relationships and the later did not depict any. There were no adopted relationships in the earlier time period and there were 9.21% in the later. The earlier time period showed 2.70% foster children relationships and the later period showed 1.32%. The data also shows that there were 111 children represented in the earlier time period and 76 represented in the later time period. This notes a significant decrease in the representation of family size (see Table 2).

TABLE 1.
Distribution of Families by Type.

	Time Period			
	1955-1970		1980-1995	
Family Type	**f**	**%**	**f**	**%**
Two-Parent Family	27	77.14%	12	34.29%
Single Parent Family	4	11.43%	15	42.86%
Relative as Guardian	2	5.71%	3	8.57%
Same Sex Parents	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Communal Family	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Step-Parent Family	1	2.86%	3	8.57%
Extended Family	1	2.86%	2	5.71%
Total	35	100.00%	35	100.00%

TABLE 2.
Distribution of Families by Type.

	Time Period			
	1955-1970		1980-1995	
Relationship	**f**	**%**	**f**	**%**
Biological	105	94.60%	68	89.47%
Step-Siblings	3	2.70%	0	0.00%
Adopted Children	0	0.00%	7	9.21%
Foster Children	3	2.70%	1	1.32%
Total	111	100.00%	76	100.00%

The major cause of a non two-parent family structure in the earlier time period was death and in the later time period it was divorce. In the earlier time period the distribution of results showed that the causes were 42.86% death, 28.57% divorce, and 28.57% abandonment. In the later time period the distribution of results showed that the causes were 47.06% divorce, 29.41% abandonment, and 23.53% death. In all cases the data reveals that there was an increase in divorce, death, and child abandonment (see Table 3).

Both time periods depict the majority of fathers working outside the home. The comparison of both time periods showed an increase of mothers working outside the home from 17.14% to 37.14% in the later time period. In both time periods there were no fathers working inside the homes as homemakers. The earlier time period showed 71.43% of the mothers working as homemakers and in the later time period 20.00% were working as homemakers (see Table 4).

Both time periods depict the majority of parents as being supportive. The results showed that there were more supportive mothers depicted than supportive fathers in the earlier time period. In stories that depicted somewhat supportive and non-supportive parents 55.55% of the problems were resolved and 44.44% of the problems were not resolved (see Table 5). In the later time period the results revealed that there were more supportive fathers depicted than mothers. In stories that depicted somewhat supportive and non-supportive parents, 38.46% of the problems were resolved and 61.53% of the problems were not resolved (see Table 6). The comparison of both time periods shows that there was an increase in supportive fathers and a decrease in supportive mothers (see Table 6 and 7).

TABLE 3.
Distribution of Causes for Non Two-Parent Family Structures.

	Time Period			
	1955-1970		1980-1995	
Causes	**f**	**%**	**f**	**%**
Divorced Parents	2	28.57%	8	47.06%
Death of Parent	3	42.86%	4	23.53%
Abandonment of Parent	2	28.57%	5	29.41%
Total	7	100.00%	17	100.00%

TABLE 4.
Distribution of Parental Figures by Occupational Role.

	Time Period							
	1955-1970				1980-1995			
	Father		Mother		Father		Mother	
Occupational Role	**f**	**%**	**f**	**%**	**f**	**%**	**f**	**%**
Works Outside Home	31	88.57%	6	17.14%	19	54.29%	13	37.14%
Homemaker	0	0.00%	25	71.43%	0	0.00%	7	20.00%
N/A *	4	11.43%	4	11.43%	16	45.71%	15	42.86%
Total	35	100.00%	35	100.00%	35	100.00%	35	100.00%

* Parents were deceased or occupational roles were not specified.

TABLE 5.
Distribution of Parental Support by Type for the 1950-1970 Time Period.

	Father		Mother	
Support Type	**f**	**%**	**f**	**%**
Supportive	25	71.43%	30	85.71%
Somewhat Supportive	3	8.57%	1	2.86%
Non-Supportive	3	8.57%	2	5.71%
Netural *	4	11.43%	2	5.71%
Total	35	100.00%	35	100.00%

* Represents deceased parents or parents absent from the story.

TABLE 6.
Distribution of Parental Support by Type for the 1980-1995 Time Period.

	Father		Mother	
Support Type	**f**	**%**	**f**	**%**
Supportive	29	82.86%	22	62.86%
Somewhat Supportive	1	2.86%	3	8.57%
Non-Supportive	2	5.71%	7	20.00%
Netural *	3	8.57%	3	8.57%
Total	35	100.00%	35	100.00%

* Represents deceased parents or parents absent from the story.

The data shows that the majority of the child protagonists did not have problems with the family structure. In the earlier time period there were 77.14% of child protagonists that did not have problems with the family structure and 22.86% child protagonists that did. By the end of the stories, 75% of the child protagonists had resolved their problems with the family structure and 25% had not. In the later time period, 54.29% of the child protagonists did not have problems with the family structure and 45.71% did. By the end of the stories, 87.50% of the child protagonists had resolved their problems with the family structure and 12.50% had not. These results show that there was a notable increase in the problems the child protagonist had with the family structure. However, the later time period shows that there was an increase in the amount of problems that were resolved.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to see if the family structure had changed over time in fictional realistic stories for children. Some areas of analysis were family type, the relationship of the child to the parent, causes of a non two-parent family, occupational roles, parental support, and problems due to family structure. A content analysis was done of 35 children's books from the time period between 1955-1970 and 35 children's books from the time period between 1980-1995. Books were selected from recommended lists and were for middle age reading children. The data was coded and analyzed. The percentages and frequencies from the earlier time period were compared with the later time period to note increases or decreases.

Summary of Findings

As a result of this study, there are several conclusions that can be made about the books analyzed regarding the family structure. The depiction of the traditional two-parent family has decreased, and the depiction of the single-parent family has increased. The majority of the stories still represent parents with biological children. Interestingly enough, the results show that the number of children represented in families has decreased, therefore, showing that parents in the later time period are represented as having smaller families. The data also revealed that there were no cases where the father was the homemaker and that there was an increase in the amount of women shown working outside the home. Another finding is that the cause of a non two-parent family in the earlier time period was due to a death of a parent and

in the later time period the cause was due to the divorce of the parents. The depictions show increases in divorce, death, and abandonment. The majority of parents were supportive; however, there was a decrease in problem resolution. As far as the family structure problems, the majority of child protagonists did not have conflicts. There was an increase in problems concerning family structure, but the percentage of problem resolution also increased.

Recommendations for Further Research

Since this study had limitations, recommendations for further research regarding children's literature and the family structure can be made. This study can be altered to analyze books selected from the catalogs of particular libraries rather than recommended lists. The span of years covered could also be shortened to study books concentrated in a particular year or years. The number of book analyzed can be increased to get a more accurate representation of the time periods. The study can be focused on one age group or different age groups than what was covered here. The study can also focus more on the types of problems the child has with the parent, and whether the problems have changed over the years. Since the family structure and the effects it has on society is an important issue, more research is important to see how authors are portraying the family.

APPENDIX A

CODING SHEET

Title
Author
Published
Year
Grade Level

Two-parent family
Single-parent family
Relative as guardian
Same sex parents
Step-parent family
Communal family
Extended family

Children:
- Biological
- Step-siblings
- Adopted children
- Foster children

Divorced parents
Death of a parent
Abandonment of parent

Occupational role:
- Works outside the home
- Homemaker
- N/A

Supportive
Somewhat supportive
Non-supportive
Neutral

Resolution

Child protagonist had problem with family structure

Problem is resolved at end of novel

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